

# GENDERED ASSUMPTIONS

AND

# WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES:

*Interrogating 'Violent Extremism'  
and political violence from  
the standpoint of women*

**Targets, supporters,  
and resisters:** Women's  
engagement with Sinhala  
Buddhist extremism on social  
media in Sri Lanka



Women and Media Collective  
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Targets, Supporters, And Resisters:

Women's Engagement With Sinhala Buddhist Extremism On Social Media In Sri Lanka  
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# INTRODUCTION

The roles assigned to women within various contexts have been the subject of academic inquiry for many years. From traditional gender roles to extraordinary ones, the spaces women have occupied have been explored and deconstructed in numerous ways. Particularly with the rise of social media in recent years, women's role in constructing, contributing to or participating in discourses that determine their own positionalities is of great significance. The agency they have or do not have in these discourses is often crucial to understanding how they engage with them. It is in this light that this paper explores how women interact with extremist discourses on social media in Sri Lanka. Its chief objective lies in exploring how women have engaged with the specific form of Sinhala Buddhist extremism that spread on social media after the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019. It looks at their positioning across varying roles as targets, supporters, and resisters of this discourse and attempts to lay out how these roles have defined their agency.

While Sri Lanka has a long history of violence and conflict between diverse actors and groups since it gained independence from the British Empire in 1948, there has been a rise in extremist rhetoric and violence against Muslims in the past decade. Much of the violence Sri Lanka has experienced post-independence – such as the youth uprisings in the South, the three-decade war in the North and East, and numerous incidents of violence against minority Muslims and Christians, to name a few – could be argued to result from continuing efforts to define and delineate the nation and its polity. Amidst this violence, ethno-religious identity plays a key role in Sri Lankan politics. Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has been instrumental, not only in defining the nation and its history, but also in instigating and perpetuating violent conflict that has been and continues to be an inherent part of nation-building in Sri Lanka (de Votta, 2007; Zuhair, 2016; Subedi, 2022). Two key examples that occurred early in Sri Lanka's history are the anti-Muslim riots in 1915 and the Tamil pogrom in 1983. In both incidents, violence was perpetrated largely by the ethno-religious majority against a minority community and emerged as a response to a perceived threat to themselves. The former, though catalyzed by conflict between the two religious groups over a procession, was driven by rumours of Muslims planning to destroy the Dalada Maligawa and rape Sinhala women; the latter was a violent response to the killing of 13 Sri Lanka Army soldiers by the LTTE.<sup>1</sup> While it must be acknowledged that many of these incidents of violence in Sri Lanka's history are driven by causes from both sides of the divide, it is also evident that they capture numerous instances when perceived affronts to Sinhala Buddhism have resulted in targeted violence against minority communities.

Within this broad context of ethno-religious violence by Sinhala Buddhists, the focus of this paper will be the anti-Muslim rhetoric that surged in the decade following the end of the war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE in 2009, and more particularly in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019. The post-war trend in Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that identified the Muslim community as its target (Ivarsson, 2019, p. 147) has resulted in many riots and incidents of violence targeting the minority Muslim community within the past few years. While purportedly

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1. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a Tamil rebel group that took up arms against the Sri Lankan government demanding a separate state for Tamils in Sri Lanka. The conflict ended in 2009 with the defeat of the LTTE by the Sri Lankan military.

motivated by religious and nationalistic ideologies, it must be noted that groups like the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) who are implicated in these aggressions are often driven by economic, political, and social concerns having, at best, a tenuous link to the philosophy of Buddhism; they have the tacit support of Sri Lanka's nationalistic government and do not have the approval of all Buddhists in the country too (Holt 2016, pp. 8-11). In 2019, after a series of suicide bombings by Islamic extremists, some of the Sinhala Buddhist majority – either led or influenced strongly by these groups – retaliated with physical and virtual violence that primarily targeted Muslim communities across the island. These events – which will be described in more detail in this paper – illustrate one of the most recent episodes of violence against a minority community in Sri Lanka. They offer a good point of departure to understand the interactions with and surrounding violence wrought by Sinhala Buddhist ideology in Sri Lanka.

A significant feature of post-war anti-Muslim violence perpetrated by the majority – as well as the particular incidents following the Easter Sunday attacks – is its rapid propagation via social media. Since 2009, anti-Muslim rhetoric has grown exponentially on social media sites like Facebook and created a space in which a large proportion of the Sinhala Buddhist demographic, especially among the youth, is being radicalized. For instance, Samaratunge and Hattotuwa (2014) observe that clashes between Muslims and Buddhists in Grandpass in 2013<sup>2</sup> and in Aluthgama in 2014<sup>3</sup> were clearly instigated on social media, and present a large volume of material across various Facebook pages showcasing the overt call for violence against Muslims as evidence. In the years preceding the anti-Muslim riots in 2018 in Kandy<sup>4</sup> too, social media was used by groups like BBS and Mahason Balakaya to stir up anti-Muslim sentiment. The proliferation of such rhetoric on social media over the past decade has played a key role in constructing a particular Sinhala Buddhist identity, an “everyday nationalism” that posits Muslims as the “Other” (Ivarsson, 2019, pp. 156-157). Violence against the “Other” is often integrated into this identity and there has been regular overlap between incidents of organized violence by extremist groups and virulent anti-Muslim hate speech on social media sites (Samuel, 2021, p. 18). Thus, it is nearly impossible to explore the nature of Sinhala Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka without considering the role that social media has played in perpetuating its ideology.

Furthermore, the different levels at which actors engage with this form of Sinhala Buddhism in Sri Lanka offer an interesting study in this context. Groups such as the BBS, Mahason Balakaya and Sinhala Ravaya have emerged within the last decade as the driving force behind the propagation of extremist ideology and violence targeting the Muslim community, and most reports on such incidents of organized violence identify them as instigators and perpetrators.<sup>5</sup> Studies have also focused on the individuals leading these groups, particularly the role of Buddhist monks in spreading extremist discourse.<sup>6</sup>

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2. Following a series of attacks on Muslim businesses and places of worship earlier in the year, on August 10, 2013, a Buddhist mob attacked the Deenul Islam mosque in Grandpass, causing injury and property damage

3. Instigated by a BBS rally held on June 15, 2014, Sinhala mobs looted, burnt, and destroyed Muslim businesses, homes and places of worship over two days in Aluthgama, Dharga Town, Welipenna and Beruwala. At least four persons are reported to have been killed during the riots. For an account of the violence in Aluthgama-Beruwala, see Haniffa, F. et al. (2014).

4. In March 2018, Sinhala mobs attacked Muslim homes, businesses, and places of worship in Digana and surrounding areas in the Kandy District. The government declared a state of emergency across the island for 10 days in an attempt to bring the situation under control. For an account of the anti-Muslim violence in Kandy in 2018, see Law and Society Trust (2021).

5. For example, see Haniffa et al. (2014) on Aluthgama-Beruwala violence and Law and Society Trust (2021) on the riots in Kandy.

6. For example, see Geethika Dharmasinghe's exposition in this series on the radical movement in Sri Lanka and its Buddhist actors.

On the opposite end, studies on anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka have explored how women have been targeted by ethno-nationalist, fundamental, and extremist discourse, both physically and virtually (Haniffa, 2015; Ibrahim and Daniel, 2015; Satkunanathan, 2021; Wahid, 2021). However, as the public participation of women in perpetrating these acts of violence has been little to none, there has been little written on how women engage with post-war manifestations of Sinhala Buddhist extremism, particularly their support or rejection of extremist anti-Muslim rhetoric. Considering both this lacuna and the significance of social media in propagating more extreme forms of Sinhala Buddhist ideology, the particularities of how women engage with this narrative online lends itself to deeper scrutiny.

Thus, this paper will attempt to understand how women engage with Sinhala Buddhist extremism on social media, focusing primarily on the anti-Muslim violence that followed the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019. The approach adopted in writing this paper will be presented, as well as a brief overview of the events being discussed. The paper will then explore how women were involved in the social media discourse around these events as targets, supporters, and resisters of Sinhala Buddhist extremism. Using the findings presented herein, it will also attempt to lay out a basic framework for future research in this area.

## APPROACH ADOPTED

A note must be made on the terminology adopted in this paper. Keeping in mind the context in which this specific issue is being addressed, the paper assumes the term “Sinhala Buddhist extremism” in referring to the particular ideology of violence propagated by groups that identify themselves as Sinhala Buddhist and whose opposition to Muslims is ostensibly driven by ethno-religious discourse. It acknowledges, however, that there are deeply entrenched problems in the use of the term “extremism.” The widespread use of “extremism” being driven by the US response to 9/11, the lack of a clear global definition of the term, and its frequently interchangeable use with “terrorism,” particularly referring to actions against the state, are some of the questions that have been raised about the use of this term more recently (Lowe, 2017; Bivens et al., 2021; Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2021). Therefore, it must be noted that the use of “Sinhala Buddhist extremism” in this paper refers to extreme – and often violent – forms of “Sinhala Buddhist ethno-nationalism” (Zuhair, 2016), distinguished from other movements of religious or nationalistic bent that have been and still are prevalent in Sri Lanka.

With regard to methodology, this paper draws information from a number of sources. Primary data is obtained from interviews with four women activists/journalists who engaged with Sinhala Buddhist extremism online in the period following the Easter Sunday attacks, as well as one group discussion with social media analysts working in Sri Lanka. The stories shared during these conversations are used to structure the paper. However, an analysis of social media profiles of women who contributed to or shared extremist content could not be incorporated into the research, and this must be noted as a significant limitation of this paper. The paper also employs some statistics showcasing trends on Facebook within the past three years to substantiate the arguments where

relevant. This statistical analysis was collated by Hashtag Generation. It was done by conducting a keyword search on Facebook and recording the number of posts that each search yielded from April 2019 to May 2021. It relates to posts on the burqa ban and allegations about sterilization/fertility pills, and highlights significant trends with regard to these issues, as well as offering illustrations of key posts shared on these topics and virtual interactions with them. The data compiled through this analysis is employed to enrich the discussion in this paper. In addition to these primary data sources, a number of secondary sources have also been accessed for this paper. Academic articles, incident reports and news reports are cited where relevant to support the argument and provide further information on the events and issues being discussed.

## ANTI-MUSLIM VIOLENCE IN 2019<sup>7</sup>

On Easter Sunday in 2019, a series of suicide bombings in three churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka killed over 250 persons and injured over 500. The attacks were carried out by the National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ), an extremist group with alleged ties to the Islamic State. Immediately after the attacks, the government imposed a ban on certain social media sites in order to prevent the spread of false information online. The president also declared a state of emergency, permitting law enforcement to arbitrarily detain and question suspects. Numerous individuals – predominantly Muslims – were arrested under these regulations, with many having very little to link them to the group that carried out the attacks. Some key arrests made in the immediate aftermath include that of researcher and activist Dilshan Mohamed who campaigned against the Islamic State (IS), on May 4, 2019 on the accusation of supporting the same; of senior journalist Kusal Perera, for a column he wrote on May 17, 2019 on the Easter Sunday attacks; and of Abdul Raheem Masaheena, on May 18, 2019 for wearing a caftan decorated with a ship's helm, mistaken by the arresting officer as a dharmachakraya.<sup>8</sup> Three years after the attacks, some of those arrested are still being detained for further investigation.

The Easter Sunday attacks marked a significant moment of violence in Sri Lankan history and were followed by several smaller, more localized incidents of violence. Many of these were purportedly in retaliation to perceived perpetrators of the bombings, and were fuelled by anti-Muslim sentiment that soared upon the attacks being claimed by Islamic extremists. In Negombo, a series of attacks were carried out on refugee communities from Muslim-majority countries, with over 1000 refugees being forced to seek shelter elsewhere. On May 5, a traffic incident in Negombo led to attacks on Muslim houses. On May 12, a Facebook post by a Muslim shop owner sparked unrest in Chilaw; mobs threw stones at three mosques in Bingiriya. On May 13, a series of attacks on Muslim-owned homes, businesses and places of worship erupted in a number of villages and towns across the North-Western and Western Provinces. Reports from those affected in the May 13 violence indicate that the attacks showed signs of premeditation, and that law enforcement did very little to prevent the violence.

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7. The account of events included in this section are primarily drawn from the Amnesty International (2021) report: From burning houses to burning bodies: anti-Muslim violence, discrimination and harassment in Sri Lanka.

8. For more details on these cases see 'Misuse of ICCPR Act and judicial system to stifle freedom of expression in Sri Lanka' in CIVICUS (2019), accessed at: <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2019/07/05/iccpr-act-and-judicial-system-being-misused-stifle-freedom-expression-sri-lanka/>

The Easter Sunday attacks also resulted in a resurgence of anti-Muslim, extremist Sinhala Buddhist rhetoric, which proliferated primarily on social media and had physical consequences for many Muslims living in Sri Lanka. Immediately after the attacks, a ban on all forms of face coverings was issued via gazette notification as part of the security measures taken by the government. While the ban expired along with emergency regulations in August 2019, it led to a number of incidents of harassment of Muslim women covering their faces and/or heads both during and after this four-month period. Another significant case that occurred during this time was that of Dr. Shafi Shihabdeen, a Muslim doctor at the Kurunegala Teaching Hospital, who was accused in a Sinhala newspaper of illegally sterilizing Sinhala Buddhist women and later arrested on charges of earning assets in a suspicious manner. Although the allegations were found to lack supporting evidence and he was reinstated as a doctor more than two years after his arrest, the widespread media attention given to the case has had serious consequences for the doctor and his family (The Sunday Morning, 2022). These incidents only probe the surface of what occurred in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks. This paper hopes to explore the role that social media played within this context, and particularly the role of women as targets, supporters and resisters of this discourse.

## WOMEN TARGETED BY SINHALA BUDDHIST EXTREMISM

One of the key ways in which Sinhala Buddhist extremism targeted women in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks is through the renewed demonizing of Muslim women's dress. In Sri Lanka – and indeed, even globally – garments like the abaya, burqa, niqab, and sometimes even the hijab have been co-opted into anti-Muslim rhetoric as a signifier of rising Islamic fundamentalism and/or a threat to national identity (Haniffa, 2005; Silva et al, 2020). The covered Muslim woman was the gonibilla<sup>9</sup> that incited fear among the majority populace (Haniffa, 2015). This narrative remained more or less within the realm of Sinhala Buddhist extremist discourse before the Easter Sunday attacks. However, the temporary ban on full-face concealment issued by the government as a security measure on April 29th launched the “burqa”<sup>10</sup> as a marker of terrorists or supporters of terrorism, and thus a question of national security legitimized by the state. As a result, the targeting of Muslim women both physically and online surged. Figure 1 below, representing the findings of a keyword search on Facebook, indicates the heightened prevalence of the “burqa ban” discourse on Facebook in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, as well as its recurrence in the next two years.

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9. The gonibilla is a legendary, fear-inducing figure featuring in Sinhala children's stories.

10. The discourse around this issue in Sri Lanka often uses “burqa ban” as a generic term referring to the ban on all forms of dress – including the niqab, abaya and hijab – that distinguish Muslim women.



Histogram of Post Count

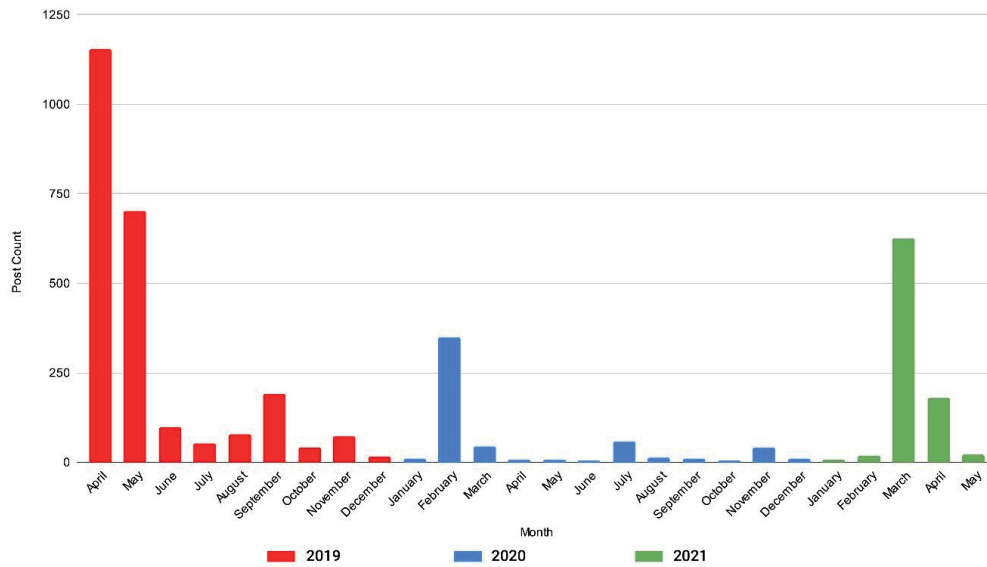


Figure 1: Conversations on Facebook around the burqa ban

Soon after the bombings in 2019, a number of social media posts called for an immediate ban on the burqa. One such meme is shown in Figure 2 below. The meme urges the ban of this goniya (sack), claiming “these [Muslims] are playing all their games through this.” Though the photograph featured in the meme was not local,<sup>11</sup> it was unquestioningly assumed to be one taken in Sri Lanka and, within four days of being posted, had been reshared 14,000 times. Figure 3 illustrates how the burqa is constructed as a symbol of terrorism, with the author addressing the post to “Fathima” and drawing comparisons to Sinhalese women. A section of the post says

Do you know, Fathima, though our girls don’t cover their entire body like you, [they] are not dangerous like you, [they] don’t knowingly give their men to other women like you [do], [they] don’t detonate bombs and kill their own children along with themselves like you [do], [they] don’t take up weapons and commit crimes like you [do].

Although the latter part of this extract likely refers to the incident where Fatima Ibrahim – the wife of one of the Easter Sunday suicide bombers – detonated a suicide vest, killing herself and her three children, the generalized language used in the post implies that violence is a tool adopted by all Muslim women. The photograph in the post – though again not one of local women – is used to reinforce the idea that Muslim women’s dress is a symbol of terrorism. Figure 4 indicates the extent to which the “burqa” had become associated with terrorism. Commenting on the expiration of the ban on full-face concealment in August 2019, the Buddhist monk is quoted as saying “Those who removed the ban on burqas and niqabs want to create another Zahran. To gain political power at least through that.” Posts such as these clearly marked Muslim women as the target of reprisals that followed the Easter Sunday attacks.

<sup>11</sup>, AFP Fact Check confirms that the photograph was taken in Afghanistan in 2009 (<https://factcheck.afp.com/not-photo-sri-lankan-muslims-it-was-taken-afghanistan-2009>)



The effects of the proliferation of such narratives on social media had serious impacts on Muslim women, both in the virtual and real world. Interviewees observe that Muslim women were often physically restricted to their homes in the months after the Easter Sunday attacks for fear of reprisals by Sinhalese extremists. One interviewee notes, "I remember my neighbour asking me to bring [coloured] cloth for her abaya because she didn't want to wear a black abaya, and she thought if it was coloured ... it would be less 'terrorist like.'" Although the ban was restricted to forms of face-covering, there was no distinction made by many – including state officials acting in their official capacity – between various types of Muslim dress such as the niqab and the hijab, leading to numerous incidents of public harassment and intimidation (Satkunanathan, 2021, pp. 170-172). Wahid (2021) describes how this measure and the heightened hate speech online resulted in Muslims calling for women to switch to coloured abayas and avoid public transport when wearing black abayas. For example, she notes the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU)<sup>12</sup>, led primarily by Muslim men, which had previously called for Muslim women to cover, changed their stance after the Easter Sunday attacks. She argues that the emergency regulation made it possible for such institutions to continue to dictate what Muslim women wore. Often, when a particular culture is being reproduced, the "burden of representation" falls on women and their actions are scrutinized and controlled with the aim of preserving the integrity of that imagined community (Yuval-Davis 1997, p. 57). In this instance, the burden of representation fell on women from two opposing sides. On the one hand, Sinhala Buddhist extremists constructed an image of all Muslims as terrorists, with the Muslim woman's dress as its central symbol. Thus, the burden of representation was distorted to frame their negative portrayal of Muslims. On the other hand, Muslim men unquestioningly accepted this framing and proceeded to dictate what Muslim women should or should not do to correctly represent their community based on it, further increasing the burden of representation placed on Muslim women. Thus, not only were Muslim women targeted by Sinhala extremists for their dress, their mobility and agency restricted by fear, but their agency to choose how they dressed or where they went was further curtailed by Muslim men.

A further point must be noted on the targeting of Muslim women in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks: extremist discourse that targets women recurs long after the catalysing event and social media enables and aggravates that recurrence. Figure 1 shows how the online discourse on the burqa ban recurs in February 2020 and March-April 2021. There were two key incidents during these times that caused the issue of the burqa ban to resurface. In February 2020, a video of a woman wearing a niqab being harassed at a supermarket went viral on social media. In the video, her accuser claims that face veils were banned in Sri Lanka and that her dress is a threat to national security. Many posts on social media about this incident adopted an aggressively extremist stance. In Figure 5 below, the author states "[They] will ban the burqa only on the day that [Muslims] plant a few bombs," and proceeds to accuse Muslims of trying to be a "special race" in Sri Lanka. Figure 6 showcases a post that followed a few days later, reshared more than 7000 times, claiming "You have a right to examine anyone wearing a burqa in any place for your children's safety." Thus, a single incident was used to bring back the anti-Muslim, "burqa ban" rhetoric almost a year after the Easter Sunday attacks occurred, rhetoric that in this case also distinctly targets the privacy and safety of Muslim women entering any public space.

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<sup>12</sup> In the words of the author, the ACJU is the "apex Muslim scholarly body in Sri Lanka." Established in 1924, they have played and continue to play a central role in decision-making relating to the Muslim community at the national level.



Figure 5: Claiming the ban would be implemented only after another bombing (Facebook, February 4, 2020)



Figure 6: Claiming the arbitrary search of anyone wearing a burqa is a right (Facebook, February 8, 2020)

A year later in 2021, another spike is seen. On March 13, then Minister for Public Security Sarath Weerasekara released a statement confirming the ban on the wearing of the burqa and other face veils in lieu of national security. Although the claim was clarified a few days later to be a proposal posed to the Cabinet, it created a surge of anti-Muslim rhetoric on social media. Incidents such as these illustrate how easily Sinhala Buddhist extremism recurs and revitalizes on social media. This then creates a space in which Muslim women in Sri Lanka are never able to feel safe from being targeted as symbols of terrorism, even long after the incident that triggered the extremist discourse occurred.

In exploring how Muslim women were targeted in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks, it is also vital to speak of how this impacts the agency of these women. In recent years, there has been increasing attention given to questions of women’s agency within the Muslim community in Sri Lanka, particularly with regard to reforming the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act. However, the mutation of the burqa/niqab/abaya/hijab into a symbol of terror in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks had serious consequences for Muslim women’s right to choose what they wore. Previously, these garments could be argued to be a form of clothing that women chose to wear; a dress that could provide freedom or security, permit economy or showcase virtue (Haniffa, 2005; Haniffa, 2015; Wahid, 2021). After the ban on face coverings, wearing even a hijab or abaya became dangerous; a simple question of safety that entirely undermined the Muslim woman’s agency in choosing what she wore. It also created a space for men to dictate yet again the response to this development (Wahid, 2021). Thus, not only did this incident make Muslim women targets of violence and hate, it also took away some of the agency they had been exercising already in choosing their dress.

# WOMEN SUPPORTING SINHALA BUDDHIST EXTREMISM

There also are women who support and participate in the violence perpetrated by Sinhala Buddhist extremists. There was a general consensus among many of the interviewees that physical violence against Muslims in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks was primarily carried out by men. An interviewee notes that the mobs that attacked Muslim houses, businesses, and places of worship on May 13 in Kurunegala comprised almost exclusively of young Sinhalese men. However, there seem to be particular ways in which women participate in inciting and promoting violence in such situations. For instance, the same interviewee notes that many women had shared posts on social media in support of the violence, encouraging people to “Put pig oil everywhere” and “Put [up] pork in the shops”<sup>13</sup> and similar extremist rhetoric. The discussion with social media analysts too corroborates and further expands this view. They state that, though men were primarily involved in creating volatile content online, women were often instrumental in their dissemination during this period. Thus, while women may not have been part of the overt expression of violence inflamed by Sinhala Buddhist extremism following the Easter Sunday attacks, they certainly contributed to its proliferation, particularly through sharing inciteful content on social media.

It is noteworthy, however, that women’s participation in post-Easter Sunday Sinhala Buddhist extremism was not restricted exclusively to the online space. Rather, there were very specific issues in which women’s engagement was greater online as well as in physical, public spaces. The debate over Muslim women’s dress is one such case. The role of women in the proliferation of this discourse is observed in two separate interviews. Both record the ban as one issue that women actively supported on social media, particularly within the Sinhala community. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that women’s engagement with and support for this discourse also spread to the physical space. An interviewee notes that Sinhalese women often took the lead during encounters in public places when Muslim women were ordered to remove their face veils. This implies that the role of women in supporting and actively perpetuating extremist discourses against Muslims after the Easter Sunday attacks takes on significance in particular instances such as the demonizing of Muslim women’s dress. More importantly, their contribution in such instances is not restricted to social media but spreads to public spaces.

The question of fertility is another concern of Sinhala Buddhist extremism in which the participation of women is seen both on social media and physically. An argument often used by Sinhala Buddhist extremists against Muslims is that they are conspiring to overtake the Sinhalese people demographically by having larger families and adding sterilization pills to food served to Sinhalese. While these concerns featured prominently in earlier incidents of anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka, they resurfaced in a significant way after the Easter Sunday attacks too. Figure 7 below from a keyword search on Facebook shows how conversations around the issue of fertility peaked in May

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13. Pigs being an animal considered unclean by Muslims, these statements exhort the intentional desecration of spaces that Muslims occupy or visit.

2019 and continue into June and July. This is largely due to news of the confiscation of alleged wanda pethi (abortion/infertility pills) as well as reports on Dr. Shafi's alleged sterilization of over 4000 Sinhala Buddhist women.

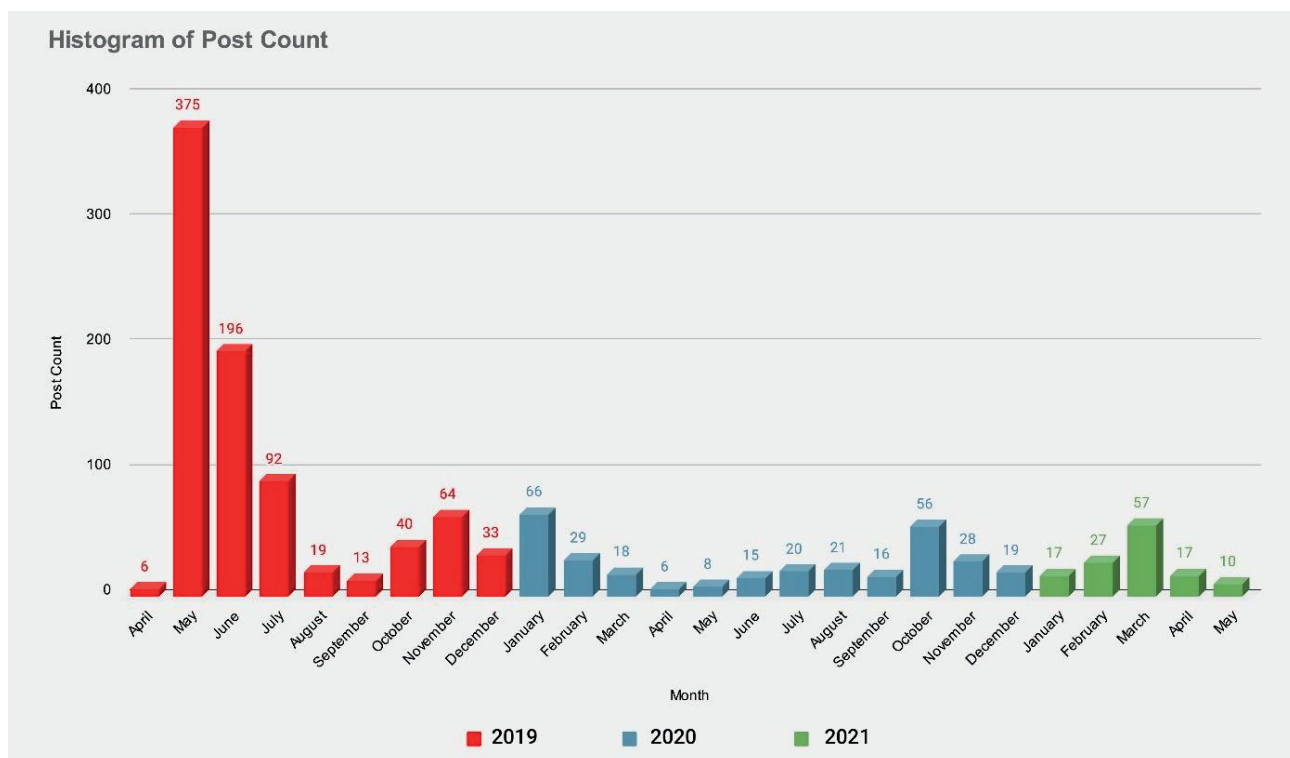


Figure 7: Conversations on Facebook around sterilization/infertility pills

Interviewees confirm that women often played a central role in disseminating posts about the need for larger Sinhalese families to counter the rising Muslim population, both before and after the Easter Sunday attacks occurred. In the accusation of Dr. Shafi on May 25, 2019, their participation shifted to the public sphere, with many Sinhalese women coming forward to record complaints against the doctor. One of the interviewees made an interesting observation in this regard. She notes that, although the initial spate of complaints was largely organized – in her words, “paid for” – by certain ruling party politicians, many women later came forward voluntarily to report alleged malpractice. She further states that there were some women for whom this case offered a scapegoat for their own or their child’s medical conditions. Thus, she says their motivation was neither extremism nor nationalism, but an attempt to explicate their circumstances. This observation brings to light an important aspect of measuring women’s participation in extremist discourse. While women may buy into and disseminate extremist narratives, not all women – and indeed, men – are motivated by the same reasoning. Some may even be far from the political and ideological motivation that is often a key feature of Sinhala Buddhist extremist rhetoric. However, the prevalence of such narratives could be argued to offer the ideal framing for these other motivations. Ultimately, the proliferation of Sinhala Buddhist extremist rhetoric online could be argued to drive these women’s public participation in supporting its ideology.

Thus, in the case of the violence that followed the Easter Sunday attacks, it is evident that women play an important role in disseminating volatile, extremist content, particularly on social media. While their virtual engagement with this rhetoric is largely limited to sharing such content, there are very specific concerns in which their physical participation is also seen and condoned. The question of Muslim women's dress seems to be one space in which Sinhalese women actively contribute to propagating Sinhala Buddhist extremism both online and in public, while the question of their own fertility – or the threat to it thereof – is another which offers a more interesting reading of women's engagement with extremism. Here too, the burden of representation emerges, with the focus placed on Sinhalese women. The discourse that Yuval-Davis names "people as power" (1997, pp. 41-43) feeds this particular branch of extremist rhetoric, with the burden of reproducing the Sinhala nation falling squarely on the shoulders of the women. In this instance, Sinhalese women accept and contribute to the role with which they are tasked. Their participation in and contribution to extremist claims regarding the targeted use of sterilization and wanda pethi could be argued to give greater legitimacy to the discourse. However, as in the case of women who accused Dr, Shafi of performing illegal procedures on them, their inability to bear children or the birth of children who are disabled too is explained using this same extremist rhetoric. Thus, while the strength of Sinhala Buddhist extremist ideology relies to some extent on being acknowledged and confirmed by these women, it also constructs a narrative that instigates their participation. They exploit the very discourse that places the burden of representation on them to frame their inability to meet its demands. Therefore, while women's participation in physical violence may not be fully acceptable when considering the traditional gender role assigned to women, their contribution towards these more traditionally gendered concerns, both virtually and really, is vital.

## WOMEN RESISTING SINHALA BUDDHIST EXTREMISM

According to interviewees' observations of the conversations happening on social media in the immediate aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks, resistance to anti-Muslim rhetoric online often came from women who were already engaged in activism both online and in their workplaces. Many of the interviewees themselves are employed in the humanitarian/development and media sectors and have actively engaged in resisting extremist views shared on social media even before the Easter Sunday attacks occurred. As such, it can be argued that women who resist extremist rhetoric online may often be already exposed to such discourse due to the work in which they engage professionally. Thus, there could be an overlap between activism and resistance in both virtual and physical spaces. While further directed research is needed to confirm this observation, it is still possible to engage with interviewees' accounts of how they engaged with and resisted anti-Muslim rhetoric on social media during this time and the response to their resistance.

A recurring observation across all interviews was the hate speech that was encountered in resisting Sinhala Buddhist extremism online. In engagements with volatile anti-Muslim content before and after the Easter Sunday attacks, interviewees note that they were met with hate speech that targeted them personally. One interviewee observes that content she posted following the Easter

Sunday attacks would often receive comments like “Thamuse thambiwaathi, umba anagaththa neda.”<sup>14</sup> Another says she has “seen a handful of the usual terrorist bitch, or Sinhala kotiya or that kinda stuff, traitor, backstabbers.” As women, their physical appearance and personal life too are often targeted. An interviewee notes that women are regularly targeted in different ways to men when they resist extremist or nationalist content online. While men are often afforded “more civility” and engagement as equals, she says “When women have resisted, [it has] been met with a lot more ridicule ... potshots about her body or her personality or her job.” As such, there is an added element of antagonism that has to be dealt with when women resist extremist discourse online.

In general, there are different ways in which these women have managed their interactions with such extremist content that proliferated online after the Easter Sunday attacks. One interviewee notes that she was selective in the messages and comments to which she responded. She says she has learned to identify individuals who are confrontational and resist change, and not engage further with them. Another interviewee notes that she had a previous experience where she was forced to deactivate her account due to the hateful and threatening messages she received. Self-censorship is also something that happens often in these instances. One interviewee speaks of the way in which she is very aware that photographs and videos of her personal life could be – and have been – used as ammunition by those looking to discredit her arguments online, leading her to vet any personal information she shares online. Another reflects on the way she words her content carefully to encourage discussion and minimize an aggressive response. Overall, it is noteworthy that these actions take into account not just the reactions these individuals may receive from those posting extremist content, but also the fact that they are engaging with them as women.

However, one interviewee made an important observation on the need to continue engaging online with Sinhala Buddhist extremism. She notes that, as a Sinhalese woman engaging in the kind of work she does, she has an advantage when addressing racist and hateful content online. She says that she feels she has more freedom to speak out on minority issues than those from minority communities. In her own words, “I’m not saying that I am going to be your spokesperson, voice or whatever, but ... the backlash in the online sense is less for those of us who aren’t from those communities.” This statement is best juxtaposed with a post sharing the video of a Muslim woman wearing the niqab in 2020 (see Figure 8). The post is titled “[She] has come wearing the burqa and is making a noise too,” implying that the Muslim woman being harassed here has no right to speak for herself. This clearly indicates that Sinhala Buddhist extremism’s target lacks not only agency but also voice.

In this context, the Sinhalese interviewee’s acknowledgement of particular kinds of privilege in addressing extremism online is vital. Although extremist rhetoric does vilify both its targets as well as those who resist its ideology, there seems to be a tacit understanding that Sinhalese women have greater agency and more scope to resist extremist content online. There also seems to be some agency claimed by these women in undertaking to “correctly” represent the ideology that underlies their ethno-religious identity. In their role as the “symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honour” (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 57), these women resist the discourse propagated by Sinhala Buddhist extremist groups. Thus, as much as Sinhalese women are implicated in legitimizing extremist discourse, they are also uniquely placed to resist it.

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14. Translates to “You Islamist [derogatory], you messed up”.





Figure 8: Sharing targeted Muslim woman’s response (Facebook, February 4, 2020)

## CONCLUSION

This study finds that women were engaged in very particular ways in the Sinhala Buddhist extremism that proliferated online following the Easter Sunday attacks. They are presented here in three key roles: as targets, as supporters, and as resisters. First, as targets of Sinhala Buddhist extremism both online and offline, Muslim women and their clothing were posited as the symbol of terrorism. Interestingly, not only was the burden of representation placed on Muslim women imposed by Sinhala Buddhist extremists, it was also affirmed by Muslim men, thus constricting women into their assigned role as the targets of extremist rhetoric and its consequences. Second, as supporters of Sinhala Buddhist extremism, Sinhalese women played a key role in perpetuating its ideology. While many women disseminated extremist content promoting violence against Muslims following the Easter Sunday attacks, they did not participate in the real violence that resulted from the dissemination of that content. Yet, in the case of regulating or policing Muslim women’s dress or of bringing accusations of illegal sterilization, Sinhalese women were willing to come forward physically to support the cause. Here too, the burden of representing the Sinhala Buddhist culture is placed on women and, while they legitimize the extremism they support, they are also influenced by it. Third, as resisters of Sinhala Buddhist extremism, women engage with this discourse both online and offline. Although these women are vilified by extremists too, they possess an important trump card to resist extremism: representing the Sinhala Buddhist community. It is evident then that women’s involvement in Sinhala Buddhist extremism online varies greatly across these three levels.

One common thread that runs through all three roles presented herein is the burden of representation that is assigned to women and how they respond to it. As targets, women are allowed very little control over what they represent or how they should do so. Not only are Muslim women tar-

geted by extremist representations of themselves, men from their own ethno-religious group too confirm their role as targets by their tacit acceptance of this extremist framing of Muslim women's dress. While these women may resist this identity in certain ways, the way in which Sinhala Buddhist extremism frames them ignores their agency in representing themselves. As supporters, Sinhala Buddhist extremism seemingly permits Sinhalese women some agency in how they represent their ethno-religious group through their participation in and contribution to the fertility discourse. This participation, however, belies the truth of their agency. Both their ability and inability to meet the expectations of this image are framed by an ideology that is most often constructed by Sinhala Buddhist men and denies these women an identity that lies outside the gendered role of reproduction. As resisters, however, Sinhalese women seem to present the greatest amount of agency within the context of this study. They are able to appropriate some of the power they wield as representatives of Sinhala culture to resist the extremist discourses they encounter online and thus construct an alternative reading of them. Therefore, it can be argued that while the targets and supporters of Sinhala Buddhist extremism that arose online in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks were denied the right to represent themselves, women who actively resisted this ideology claimed greater agency for themselves.

This paper also offers a number of pathways for future research. First, there is room to study how Muslim women respond to Sinhala Buddhist extremism. This paper only focused on Muslim women as targets of Sinhala Buddhist extremism. While much research has been done on how they resist traditional, patriarchal discourses within their own community, there is also space to explore how they engage with and respond to their framing as the "Other" of Sinhala Buddhist extremism. Second, there should be greater exploration of women who support extremist discourses. Engaging in a more focused and detailed analysis of women who support different forms of extremism on social media could present a deeper understanding of how extremism appeals to women and acquires their support, particularly in ways that are different to men. Third, the link between posting volatile content online and actively participating in violence would also benefit from further research. Fourth, the greater involvement of women in gendered issues raised by Sinhala Buddhist extremism – such as the burqa ban and the question of fertility – could be explored further. Fifth and finally, the interaction between supporters and resisters of extremist discourses should be studied in greater depth. As most observations made by interviewees accounted for extremist men responding to their resistance, intentionally seeking how women who support Sinhala Buddhist extremism respond to women who challenge it could yield some interesting findings to enrich the arguments made here.

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